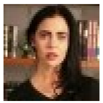
Archaeologists fear biblical artifacts, monuments won't survive Yemen war



By **Hollie McKay | Fox News**

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Yemen's civil war puts ancient biblical ruins in peril

MARIB, Yemen – After years of internal conflict and ISIS insurgency across Iraq and Syria destroyed much of what was left of the Middle East’s pre-Islamic history, experts now fear the protracted civil war in neighboring Yemen will quietly erase its own rich biblical roots.

“The historical sites are of great importance to Yemen and are part of Yemeni history and identity,” Iris Gerlach, Head of the Sana’a Branch at the German Archaeological Institute Orient Department, told Fox News. “Ultimately, this would be comparable to the destruction of the White House or the Statue of Liberty for Americans. The intentional destruction as well as war-related collateral damage is a crime on the world cultural heritage. As long as the war is going on, more monuments will be destroyed.”

The ancient temple believed to have once housed the Queen of Sheba. (Fox News/Hollie McKay)

As a crib to some of the world’s oldest civilizations, Yemen played an imperative role in the accession of empires and economies, beginning around 1000 BC. Yet the assault on its antiquity in recent times has been fierce.

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN RUINS DISCOVERED UNDER FORMER ISIS-HELD TERRITORY

And the threat of even more damage to the country’s trove of treasures looms large – perhaps most poignantly in the site considered to have once housed the mysterious and powerful Queen of Sheba (Bilquis in Arabic), located just 30 miles east of the small Yemen city of Marib.

Remnants of the Sheba dynasty in Yemen. (Fox News/Hollie McKay)

There is a sense violence could ignite at any moment.

“The Queen of Sheba is known from the Old Testament – I Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9. According to these accounts, she decided to visit King Solomon after hearing his wisdom. She tested him with hard questions and brought him gifts of spices, gold and precious stones loaded on camels,” explained John Wineland, professor of history and archaeology at Southeastern University. “These gifts reflect the main source of wealth for Sheba, also known as Saba, which was an overland caravan trade connecting India, Arabia and East Africa.”

(Fox News/Hollie McKay)

Later, tales of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon were further elaborated in Jewish, Christian and Islamic texts – including the Koran – and their legacy cemented in all the Abrahamic faiths and sculptures of Sheba adorn great Gothic cathedrals across the world.

While there is some discrepancy over the precise origin of the enigmatic royal, with some experts suggesting she may have been Egyptian or Ethiopian, the vast majority of scholars conclude she birthed from what is now modern-day Yemen. Her dynasty controlled the export of the ever-valuable and cherished frankincense, which grew exclusively along the nation’s southern coast, and ruled the region from around 1000 BC to AD 290.

Crucial to Sheba’s reign was said to to be the Kingdom’s Temple, documented to have once been her throne, internationally lauded for its majestic entrance, magnificent pillars and great annexes.

Today, children play in these prized yet imperiled ruins. But just a day before a Fox News visit to the area, a tribal land dispute reportedly left one local dead on the road leading to the site. That night, Houthi missiles launched nearby rattled the fragile structures. The overwhelming feeling of war-torn uncertainty remains palpable.

Location of the Great Marib Dam, considered to be one of the world's greatest engineering marvels. (Fox News/Hollie McKay)

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In a desperate bid to salvage what remains, last year UNESCO issued coordinates of at least 50 prominent historical and holy locations in Yemen to the various militaries involved in the battle. Nonetheless, the file of decimated or marred artifacts and sites remains thick.

Soldiers surround Marib's Great Dam. (2018 The Washington Post)

The regional museum of Dhamar, in Yemen’s southwest, which was stuffed with thousands of irreplaceable relics from the Himyarite Kingdom – the powerful tribe from the south conquered Sheba/Saba after 290 AD and went on to develop trade relations with the Roman Empire – has been rubbled. More than 60 other vital ancient locations have also been entirely destroyed or severely damaged, including medieval castles like the Sira Fortress in Aden, and the venerable Qassimi neighborhood in the capital of Sana’a.

Then there is one of the grandest draws of Queen Sheba’s city – the Great Marib Dam – which was also partially crippled in a 2015 airstrike.

Some Yemenis conjecture that the almost 3,000-year-old dam, deemed by many experts to be the world’s oldest and one the country’s most heralded attractions, was consciously targeted by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition. The unpopulated area was pounded several times in 2015, lacerating the northern sluice gate.

The UN has deplored the recent destruction to the ancient, pre-Islamic walled city of Baraqish in Yemen. (Getty)

“The Great Dam of Marib is probably the most important ancient water management building in the world. The outlet structure is part of an irrigation system that allowed Sabians to practice sustainable agriculture in the arid zone for more than 2,000 years,” Gerlach observed.

Marib Dam, built in the 8th century BC in a quest to bolster agriculture in the otherwise desert terrain, is still considered an engineering marvel. It was breached and rebuilt numerous times over its millennium of sustaining life in the region, with one inscription indicating that one rehabilitation effort required some 20,000 men and 14,000 camels.

One major blowout in the 6th century AD is believed to have caused the city of Sheba to drown beyond recovery, its population migrating out into Syria and Iraq, then known as Mesopotamia.

“There are more archaeological sites in Yemen than anywhere else on the Arabian Peninsula,” stressed Daniel Varisco, Senior Postdoctoral Scholar for the Institute for Social Anthropology at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. “Especially important are the thousands of inscriptions in ancient South Arabic languages and dialects. These give details on the rulers, battles, religious rituals, economy and private letters.”

AMAETEUR ARCHAEOLOGIST DISCOVERS 1,800 YEAR-OLD GOLDEN RING FROM ANCIENT ROME

The 12th-century al-Qahira citadel in Taiz, Yemen, has been maimed in the ongoing war. (Getty)

While both sides are blamed for igniting and continuing the devastating civil war, experts have largely pointed to the Saudi coalition as bearing responsibility for the majority of archeological destruction – either accidentally or deliberately as a means to strike the Houthi enemies or to dispirit local supporters of the rebels.

"If the targeting of heritage sits of archaeological significance continues to be falsely denied with no proper investigations or repercussions or when hit they are deemed to be collateral damage, impunity will reign," charged Mohammad Alwazir, director of legal affairs for the Arabian Rights Watch Association. "And there will be nothing left effectively standing in the way of such actions that violate the people's cultural rights."

Fighting in the monument-filled Sirwah-area has left many Yemeni's on edge. (Getty)

But the coalition has persistently denied targeting historical sites, while representatives for the opposing Houthi group have dismissed coalition claims they use such key locations to store weapons or as bases. They insist their presence in or around such sites is purely to protect them.

But in addition to physical damage to Yemen’s vital yet delicate classical structures, which have also been inflicted by shockwaves from even distant explosions, foreign excavators and historians too have been forced to flee the country amid the fighting – thus stopping important work in illuminating Yemen’s long and winding yesteryear.

“The conflict in Yemen not only prevents scholars from researching and recording the important history of the region, it causes the destruction of the sites and artifacts. These are not only damaged by direct shelling but also the vibrations of nearby conflict,” Wineland lamented. “And the neglect of sites too leads to vandalism and looting.”

The Yemen war, which sparked in March, 2015 after a Saudi-led coalition began an intense aerial campaign to dislodge the Iran-aligned Houthi rebels from large swaths of the country, has yet to produce a victory for either side. More than 10,000 are estimated to have been killed in the fighting, which has spiraled into what the UN has termed the worst humanitarian disaster in the world.

“First and foremost, it is the humanitarian crisis in Yemen that needs to be resolved by an immediate end to the war,” added Varisco. “Yet it is also important that the rich and unique cultural heritage of Yemen not be destroyed.”

Hollie McKay has been a FoxNews.com staff reporter since 2007. She has reported extensively from the Middle East on the rise and fall of terrorist groups such as ISIS in Iraq. Follow her on twitter at @holliesmckay